

# Exploring Ethnography in Conservation Research

Caitlin Spangler-Bickell\*†

Supervisors: Renée van de Vall\*, Carolina Orsini†, Iolanda Ratti†  
\*Maastricht University & †MUDEC (Museo delle Culture), Milan

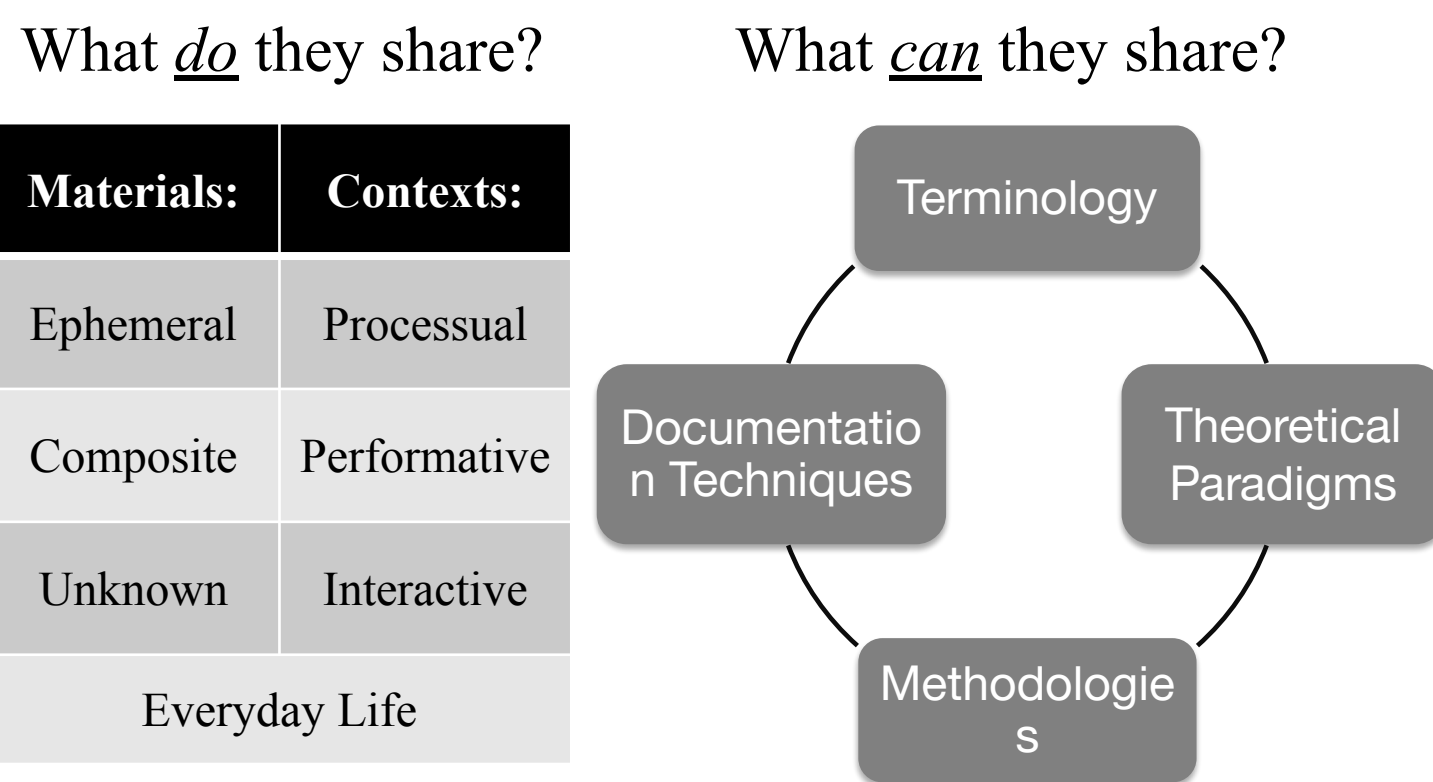
This poster aims to clarify what the terms *ethnography* and *ethnographic* mean in general, and how they could be used in conservation research. A case study demonstrates one of the many possible ways.

## Introduction

The PhD project “Conservation of Contemporary Art and Ethnographic Materials: Relationships, Similarities and Differences” responds to the material and conceptual overlap between works from these two fields that has been highlighted by conservation researchers in recent years<sup>1,2,3</sup>. It aims to examine commonalities: what these categories *do* share. As part of NACCA (New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art), which aims to rethink historically grown professional distinctions, another goal is to look for what these fields *can* share: how some terms, forms of documentation, theoretical paradigms, and methodologies from one area of practice can benefit the other.

□ In this poster, I present ethnography as one of those methodologies.

## Contemporary Art and Ethnographic Materials



## What is Ethnography? Ethnographic?

There are 3 different common usages of these words all with different meanings:

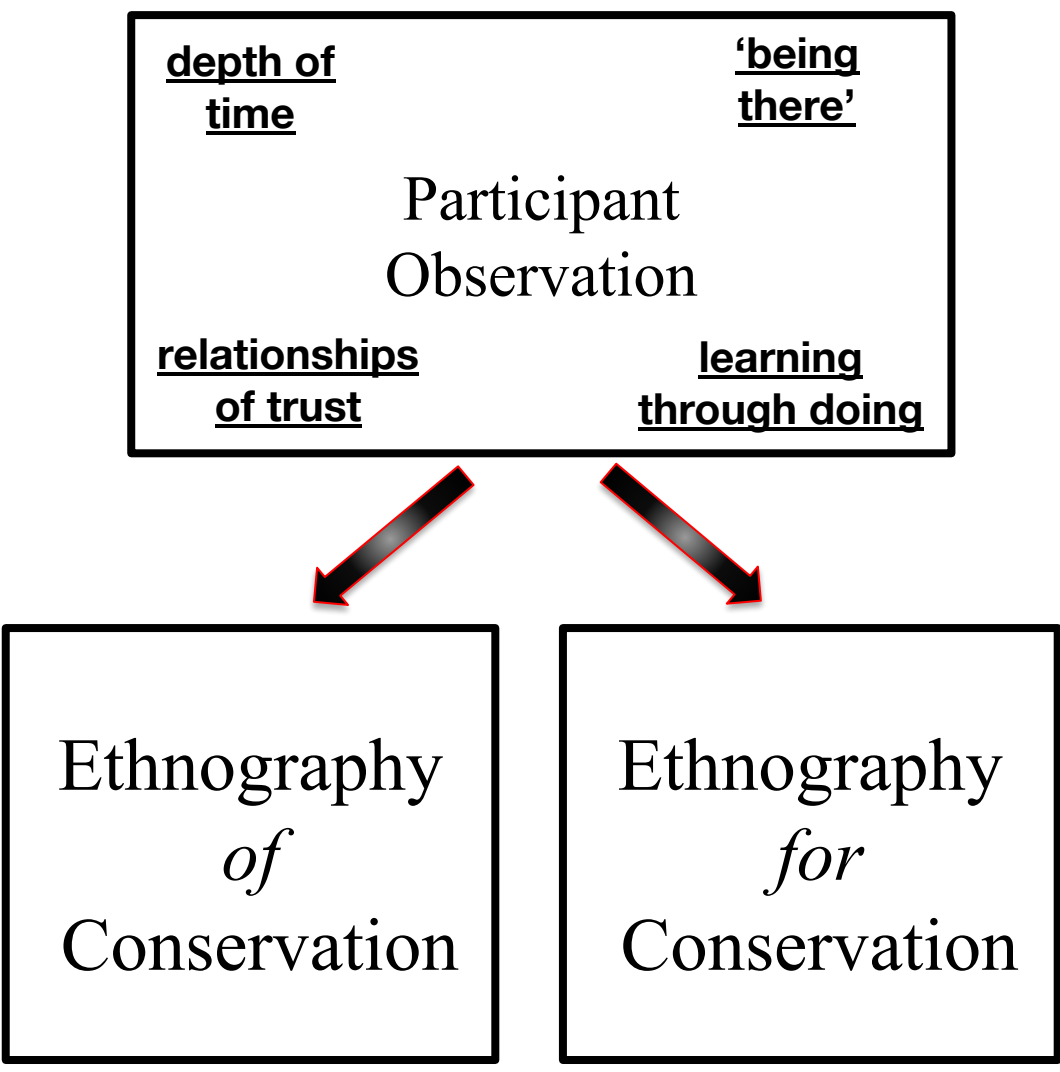
1. Class of Cultural Objects
2. Research Methodology
3. Research Product

- Ethnographic materials are cultural, used in everyday life or for special occasions like religious rituals. ‘Ethnographic’ is sometimes incorrectly used to mean ‘non-western’ – but any material that teaches us something about cultural practices and ideologies can be considered ethnographic.
- Conducting ethnography means using a particular set of anthropological techniques to study any culture or subculture.
- *Ethno – graphy* simply means *writing culture*, so this usage of the term refers to the thick description and analysis written by an anthropologist after having studied cultural issues using ethnographic methodologies.

## Ethnography as a Research Methodology

‘Participant Observation’ is anthropology’s most particular research method, which moves from objective observation to subjective participation in the cultural events being studied.

- A depth of time spent in one’s study environment lets things ‘return to normal’ and shows evolution and change
- Relationships of trust form when the researcher participates and gains empathetic understanding
- Learning through doing yields tacit, embodied knowledge<sup>4</sup> by engaging all the senses
- ‘Being there’ and experiencing what one is studying first-hand illuminates otherwise unattainable details



I distinguish two ways ethnographic methods can be useful in contemporary art conservation research:

- 1) Conducting an **ethnography of conservation** to study and analyse the implications of conservation practice itself<sup>5</sup>.
- 2) Using **ethnography for conservation**, borrowing techniques and concepts like participant observation to better understand and document artworks<sup>6</sup>.

For my PhD I conduct an ethnography of conservation during a 6-month internship, but I also explore using ethnographic research methods *for* conservation in 3 case studies.

## Case Study: George Nuku Artist Residency at MUDEC

During the month-long residency at MUDEC of New Zealander artist George Nuku, who uses traditional Maori techniques to sculpt modern materials like Plexiglas, I assisted him as an artistic collaborator and documented the project with photos and notes. This produced many valuable insights about the development of his work and the nature of such projects in general.

Through participant observation during the Creation / Production life stage I discovered:

- Nuku’s artistic vision and working methods
- how physical and conceptual components of the work fit together
- the sequence of events leading to the finished work
- the various players that affected those events, and how
- an intimate and more accurate understanding of the materials used

Nuku draws onto a lampshade until his design looks right, then makes schematic sketches to explain the idea.

I take measurements, make new sketches, and calculate how to continue drawing the motif.

Here, another assistant traces out the design while Nuku speaks to a MUDEC curator about publication materials for the exhibition.

Nuku test-carves a small section of the lampshade to see how it looks and determine his approach.

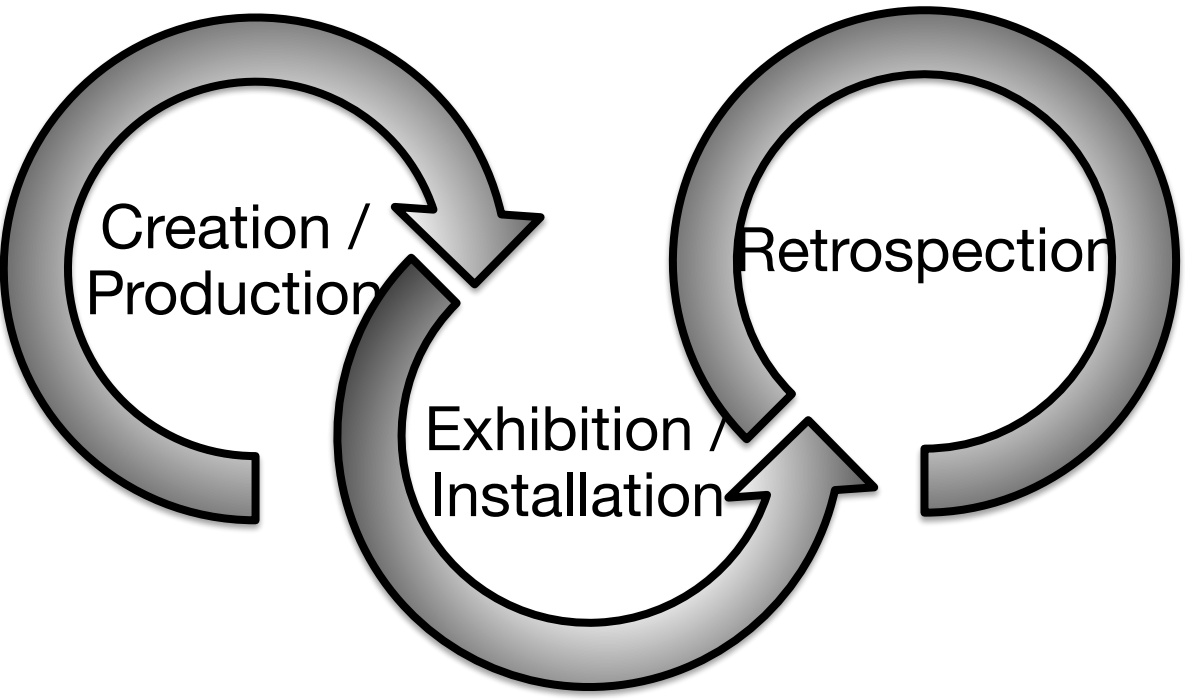
We test the effect of light on the carvings. Nuku uses a technique of painting a solution on sculpted areas to brighten and clarify them. I did not fully understand this method and its desired effect until I did it myself. I saw the materials in a completely new way, noticing details I had never picked up before.

The above photos demonstrate how many actors and factors influenced the objects. Participant observation revealed this and the many metamorphoses during creation / production before the installation reached its final shape seen here.

I explore ethnographic methods for documentation at 3 different biographical stages<sup>7</sup> in the life of ethnographic and artistic works:

1. During the creation or production of a work  
*George Nuku Artist Residency at MUDEC (Milan, September 2016)*
2. During the exhibition or installation of a work  
*Contemporary Artwork (TBD – Milan, Autumn 2017)*
3. From the point of retrospection when conservators deal with objects left over from a work that was installed in the past  
*Offerings from altars installed at MUDEC (2015) and the Fowler Museum at UCLA*

## Ethnography for Conservation



## Conclusions

- The terms ethnographic and ethnography can refer to 1) a Class of Cultural Objects, 2) a Research Methodology, or 3) a Research Product.
- Ethnography as a **Research Methodology** can be applied in 1) an Ethnography of Conservation and 2) Ethnography for Conservation.
- My three case studies explore **Ethnographic Methods for Conservation**, at three different life stages of artistic and ethnographic works: 1) Creation / Production, 2) Exhibition / Installation, and 3) Retrospection.
- As one example of ethnography *for* conservation, my case study of **Creation / Production** during George Nuku’s artist residency at MUDEC shows how ethnographic methods yield information about artworks that are not accessible in other ways. It was only once I myself participated in George Nuku’s artistic practices that I truly understood them. The smells, sounds, and textures I experienced in the workshop taught me things that textual and visual information is not able to communicate, and the interactions I witnessed showed me influential processes of production that often go unnoticed, unrecorded, or undervalued.

## Acknowledgements



I am very grateful to my supervisors for their supportive direction and feedback, and especially to George Nuku for his generous participation.

This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement n° 642892.

## Further Information

Website - [nacca.eu/spangler-bickell](http://nacca.eu/spangler-bickell)  
Email - [c.spangler-bickell@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:c.spangler-bickell@maastrichtuniversity.nl)



## References

- <sup>1</sup>Pugliese, M., Ferriani, B., Orsini, C., Patti, M., & Bernardeschi, I. (2014). Bridging the gap – linking conservation strategies in the preservation of our ethno-anthropological heritage and contemporary art. ICOM-CC 17th Triennial Conference, Melbourne, 2014.
- <sup>2</sup>Wisse, D. C. J., Brokerhof, A. W., & Scholte, T. (2005). Decisions on the restoration of a Trobriand yam storehouse: the “Decision Making Model for the Conservation and Restoration of Modern Art” applied to an ethnographic object. 14th Triennial Meeting - The Hague Preprints ICOM, 1, 120–126.
- <sup>3</sup>Hornbeck, S. (2013). Intersecting conservation approaches to ethnographic and contemporary art: Ephemeral art at the National Museum of African Art. In L. Kaplan, K. Dodson, & E. Hamilton (Eds.), AIC Objects Specialty Group Postprints (vol. 20, pp. 207–226).
- <sup>4</sup>Schatzki, T. R., Cetina, K. K., & Savigny, E. von (Eds.). (2001). The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory. London / New York: Routledge.
- <sup>5</sup>Stigter, S. (2016). Autoethnography as a New Approach in Conservation. Studies in Conservation: IIC 2016 LA Congress: Saving the Now, 61(S2), 227–232.
- <sup>6</sup>Saaze, V. van. (2013). Installation art and the museum. Presentation and Conservation of Changing Artworks. Amsterdam University Press.
- <sup>7</sup>Vall, R. van de, Hölling, H., Scholte, T., & Stigter, S. (2011). Reflections on a biographical approach to contemporary art conservation. In ICOM-CC: 16th Triennial Conference, Lisbon, 2011.

All photos taken by Caitlin Spangler-Bickell, used here courtesy of George Nuku and MUDEC